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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, FEBRUARY 21 - 27

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¶1. This is another in a series of weekly cables drawn mostly from public media, as well as think-tank, NGO, and opposition web-sites, selected to show the diversity of life in Kazakhstan, and information about it available to citizens of Kazakhstan. Our goal is to choose what might interest and be of use to various end-users in Washington and -- especially -- to provide a more complex view from the other side of the world, illustrating the vitality (and sometimes the quirkiness) of discourse available to citizens of Kazakhstan.

RESTAURANT LANDS NEAR KARAGANDA

¶2. Residents of Ushtobe, a small village near Karaganda in central Kazakhstan, woke up to a surprise this week when they discovered a jetliner parked in a field right under their windows. Fearing a landing gone horribly wrong, the residents called emergency services and reported a "crash." Yet, upon the arrival of emergency personnel, it soon became clear that the airliner did not crash, but was towed into the field by a tractor trailer which stood nearby trapped in snow. Relieved that they were not facing an aviation disaster, people began inquiring about how the plane got into their field. Soon, the mystery was cleared up. An enterprising and well-connected businessman from Karaganda bought the long-retired jet and decided to convert it into a restaurant. He chose a place in Karaganda, received all the necessary permits, and only needed to deliver the plane to its new location. Having a penchant for drama, the businessman decided to keep his plans secret and surprise Karaganda with the new landmark restaurant. However, the snowy conditions thwarted his plans, since both the plane and the tractor trailer pulling it to its new location became stuck in Ushtobe and frightened its residents. In a happy ending, the plane was salvaged the next day and delivered to its new location. Now, Karaganda residents impatiently await the grand opening.

ECONOMIC CRISIS JUST SENSATIONAL PRESS REPORTING?

¶3. The economic crisis has been the number one topic in Kazakhstan for quite a while. But is there a crisis at all? Some people think not, and believe that all talk about an economic crisis in the country is just the result of sensationalist reporting from the "yellow" press. Toktarbai Kadambayev, a Majilis deputy, said last week: "They write that everything is bad but when I was in the

Taranov region (of northern Kazakhstan), I saw that everything was quite fine. Not one small or medium business has folded. The prices have stayed as they were, and the people have kept their jobs." Local businessmen, however, hold a different opinion of the situation. "Everyday, I see with my own eyes that businesses today are facing a mass of difficulties. Dear deputies, please inform the highest levels about our difficulties. And there is no need to calm us down," said Antonin Cherepanov, the leader of a local business association.

AKTOBE COURT UPHOLDS MUSLIM MAN'S RIGHT TO WEAR BEARD

14. An Aktobe court ruled that a former employee of a local oil company be reinstated after he was fired from his job for refusing to shave his beard. Talgat Kyrkymbai has worked as a foreman in the production facility of CNPC-Aktobemunaigas since 1998. In 2006, he became a professing Muslim and, in accordance with Muslim tradition, grew a beard. Kyrkymbai's new beard, however, soon became a source of controversy. The company's safety regulations required all men working in the production facility to be clean shaven, so that they can wear gas masks, which are used in the case of dangerous gas leaks. Kyrkymbai, refusing to shave his beard for religious reasons, bought his own gas mask, produced specifically for bearded men. However, CNPC-Aktobemunaigas ultimately fired Kyrkymbai last November after repeatedly urging him to shave. This led Kyrkymbai to bring a claim in court to uphold his religious rights. After reviewing the case for nearly a month, the judge ruled in his favor. "A precedent has been set. This means that Kazakhstan respects the religious freedom of the population. And the main thing is that people who will come after me will not have to face the same problems," said Kyrkymbai.

SMALL TOWN FACES A COLD SPELL

15. Karabulak, a small town near Almaty, faces the prospect of finding itself without heat. The local sugar refinery which has

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supplied the town with heat for the last 62 years informed Karabulak's residents that it will cut off their heat because of the difficult financial situation of the company. "The decision of the sugar refinery has shocked us," local resident Raikhan Doskuzhanova said. "In addition to residential dwellings, the refinery provides heat to a regional hospital, kindergarten, school, and other social institutions." At this moment, Karabulak residents are forming an initiative group called "We'll save our homes" to prevent the heat that is scheduled for April 1 -- a time when it is still cold in that region.

HOAGLAND